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PAUL VERLAINE.*

OF all the poets, from Waring to Ernest Dowson, who have lost themselves in the nineteenth century, the most pitiable, the most pathetic, because in a sense the most helpless, is Paul Verlaine, the Pauvre Lélian of his own "*Poètes Maudits*." As François Coppée said at his funeral, he had remained a child to the end. He had only too often done the things which he ought not to have done, but he did them always suddenly, impulsively, driven on by one of those compelling whims which had so frequently led him to garrets, to hospital cots, and had thrice marked him with the brand of the criminal. Yet he believed in them still; at least, he followed them. Like Rabelais, he seemed to think that happiness lay at their end, *Bon espoir y gist au fond*: but he never found it and he was to be forever disappointed. Yet having yielded and having fallen, he would be overcome by the need of confession, and he would tell you all, ingenuously, naïvely, like a child. The unaccustomed silence of his room, a sheet of white paper and his pencil, and he would start his *peccavi*: a new-found friend and a little absinthe, and the sad story would have to be recounted. The café table became his confessional, the café blotter often his confessor.

This is the secret of his work, of his characteristic verse from "Saturnian Poems" to "*Œuvres Posthumes*," of his prose which he could not help making autobiographical, as witness the "Confessions," "My Hospitals," "My Prisons," "The Memoirs of a Widower," even of his one volume of criticism, in which he could not refrain, *mutato nomine*, from passing judgment on himself. He was pent up in his own immediate experience, hedged in by his own horizon. The noises of the world came to die at the threshold of his cell, and like the squirrel in the cage he turned forever the illusive wheel of confession. Illusive,—for aside from its bringing him an occasional much-needed five-franc piece from his publisher, Vanier, and providing that catharsis for excess of sorrow which even so sane an artist as Goethe knew, his written confessions in poetry and his many unwritten ones in prose availed him nothing. Sincere as he was when he made them, and contrite as he momentarily felt, his *confiteor* ended, the late penitent was as willing and as ready to

* "*Paul Verlaine, Sa Vie,—Son Œuvre*." By Edmond Lepelletier. Paris: Société du Mercure de France.

sin as before. His poetry can therefore best be considered as the long, broken but sincere confession of a rather sorry sinner.

So let us not attempt the impossible and try to whitewash Verlaine. Far as that process has gone and much as it has included, Verlaine remains still beyond it. This literary Ethiopian will not change his skin for all the kind offices of biographers. Like Villon, he was frankly, avowedly, a very poor citizen. Besides being a very excellent poet, there are many other valid reasons which would have excluded him from any ideal republic. We may as well, as does his latest biographer, begin by admitting these faults, accept them as premises, and with the poems as conclusions consider the interesting process of their creation.

Most English readers have been content to believe that Verlaine was essentially a Latin Quarter product, that he spent his youth and manhood on the *Boul' Mich*, and that his vision of the world was seen only through the opalescence of absinthe. That idea has been strengthened by the excellent, if partial, appreciation of Arthur Symonds, who, in his treatment of the French Symbolists, inclines to the interesting but rather dangerous view that the best literature is the reflection of the worst life; and the unpleasant, unsympathetic and totally unfair account of a visit to the poet by George Moore, the same Moore who had won a courted notoriety by the publication of the "Confessions of a Young Man," and certain novels, not distinguished for moral tone, like "A Mummer's Wife" and "Spring Days." It is not astonishing that so robust and masculine an intelligence as George Moore's should have failed to appreciate a talent as delicate as was, after all, Verlaine's; it is, however, extraordinary to find him in the study in question writing like a Puritan. He had gone to see Verlaine at a time when the poet, already afflicted by the hereditary malady which had carried off his father, was lying penniless and infirm in a dingy, and, we may well believe, dirty, little room off the Cour St.-François. He was in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, had but recently lost through process of law the last of his patrimony, he was not yet the King of the Poets and the demigod of the Quarter, but without funds and with his constitutional incapacity for regular employment was waiting to be carried to one of the hospitals which were, from this time forth, so frequently to be his retreats. The circumstances might very well have inspired some pity.

M. Lepelletier gives us a completer and a saner view. He and Verlaine had known each other from childhood, and it is no slight tribute to the poet that he should have kept such a friend through life. The two young men had begun their struggle together. They had been associated in the Parnassian movement, and had kept in touch to the last, as numerous letters here quoted will show. M. Lepelletier outgrew the earlier Bohemianism, has become a distinguished editor and novelist, and it is plain that in the closing years of the poet's life he looked upon him as the moral and physical invalid that he was. To him Verlaine had intrusted the making of his biography, and it has here been M. Lepelletier's intention to report Verlaine and his cause aright. It is a franker, fuller study of his character and temperament than the previous works of Morice and Donos. He admits the damaging quality of much of the evidence, and only in regard to the Rimbaud affair does he stop to combat what he considers uncharitable interpretations. He does not apologize; Verlaine's poems are his exculpation: he feels that one could forgive the author of "*Sagesse*" almost anything; and, after all, there is little to forgive. He harbored no malice, he could injure no one: he had wrecked his own happiness and the life teaches its own lesson. He was restless and impulsive. Like Waring and Dowson, like Jules Laforgue and Villiers de l'Isle Adam, he did not fit into that nook and cranny of the world into which he had been born. Hence it was that he was forever wandering. Like Baudelaire, he was afflicted with that poignant, unassuageable nostalgia for the places where he had not been. He lacked balance and poise, and it is this particularly that his enemies hold up against him. It is precisely this, however, that makes his poetry. To him life was instant and momentary; he had no philosophy, any more than Sappho and Catullus.

For him there was no pause, no station, no rest. For some years after his imprisonment at Mons, where he had seen the light on his road to Damascus, he seemed to have found it in the church, in the faith of his childhood, and he gave us the greatest religious poems of his century, perhaps the greatest since Dante. Released at last, he flees from temptation to England, where he teaches for a time in a quiet little boarding-school, and learns to love the English meadows and the sea, the sea which to him is "more beautiful than cathedrals," and which few of

his country's poets save Hugo have learned to understand. Then he comes back to France again, and is accepted as professor of French literature in the strictly Catholic seminary at Rethel. It was a strange asylum for him who had been to Brussels with Arthur Rimbaud. But the priests loved this modest little man of many sorrows, and he lived for a time peacefully. Yet it could not be. Suddenly, inexplicably, the old longing, the need of changing his bed in this world's hospital comes over him again, and so without farewell, without a word, he leaves his sure retreat, the quiet college and his cell and the priests who did not know him. For a time he would live in the country and commune with nature, but the hand of the lutanist could hardly hold the plough; he was more interested in watching sunset and moonrise than in calculating seed-time and harvest, and so the experiment failed, as they all did. Then he drifts to Paris, and, being still unknown, he sinks to the depths in which George Moore found him. He was not really to reconquer himself again, and the remainder of his life was to be spent largely in the Quarter. His work was to lose its earlier directness and variety; he was fumbling in the strings. He had had a way of identifying himself with things seen; his descriptions were purely subjective, for to him, as to Amiel and Corot, a landscape was merely an *état d'âme*. He had, too, the *hântise* of the "far countrie." Yet his was not, if we dare use the word, the muscular impatience of inaction of an Odysseus or an Elizabethan voyager. It was the nervous unease of a sick child of his century, a younger and weaker, and yet assuredly a spiritual, brother of de Musset and Heine and Leopardi. He spent his life in conjuring with insubstantial "Beams" and shadows. He attempted to eternalize the fleeting moment, and through the necromancy of his words and the magic of his rhythms he has often succeeded. His is the poetry of immediate unrationalized experience; he could render sensation more convincingly than any singer of his time, and his life as here set forth by his biographer was a broken mosaic of such uncoordinated experiences. The story is frankly told by M. Lepelletier, and it is not in any sense an edifying one; yet it will be found most interesting by those who are concerned with that "new poetry" which his disciples believed Verlaine had invented.

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